


Happy Christmas



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The INQUIRER

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"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
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Inquiring Words

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

— Isaiah 9:6

We need a little Christmas

Perhaps it is all the fear around us – the economy, the Earth in crisis, the intractable poverty and disease which seem to worsen, even as science comes up with solutions. But it just feels like we really need Christmas this year – perhaps in the way it felt when humans first decided to celebrate the Winter Solstice. We yearn for a return to the light.

I don't mean that we need perfect presents, perfect decorations, perfect meals – all gathered in a stressed-out shopping frenzy. No. We need kindness. We need blessings. We need each other.

Happy Christmas.

— MC Burns

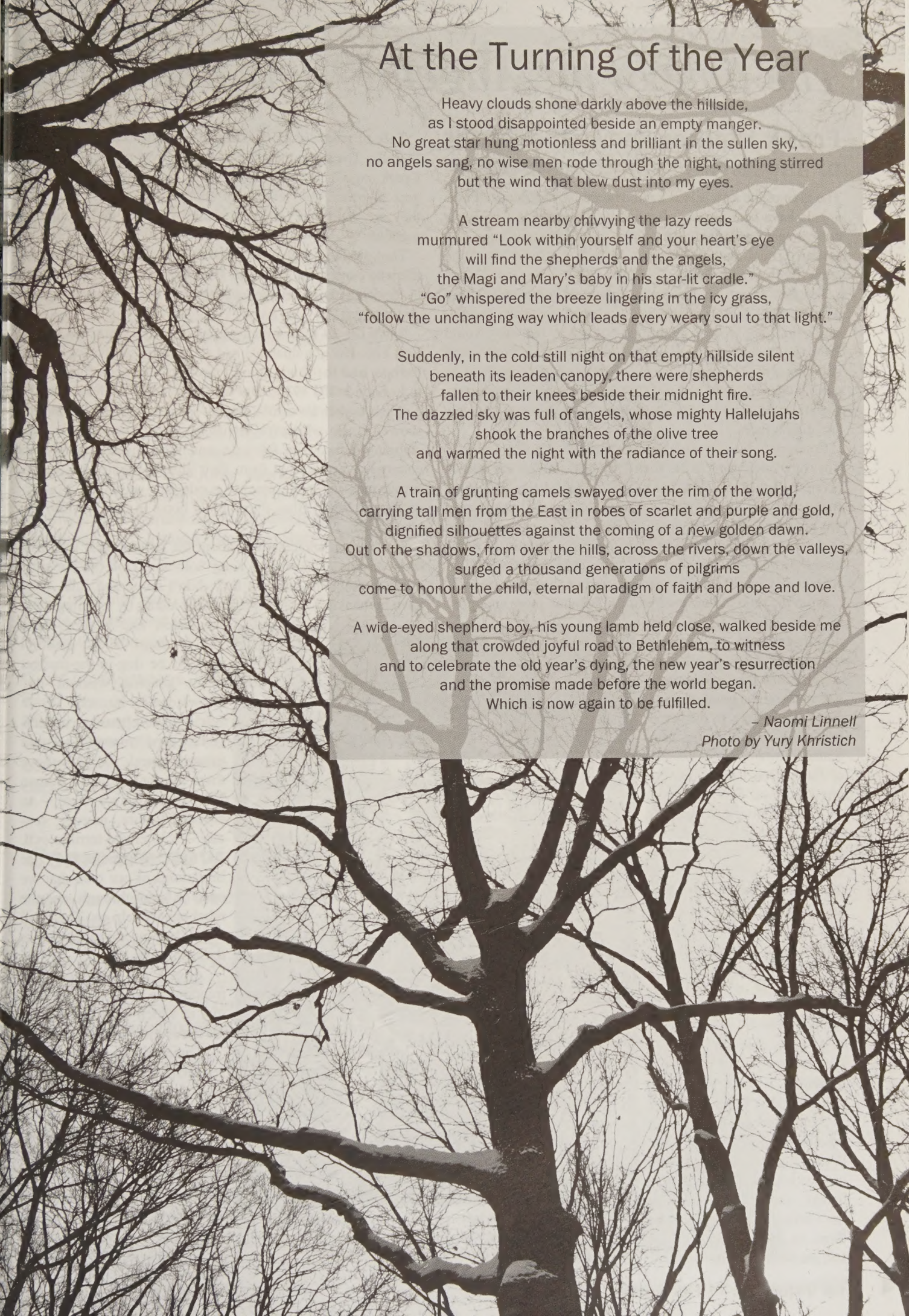
With thanks

This colour double issue of *The Inquirer* was sponsored by the Bury Unitarian Church, Lancashire. The Inquirer will skip one issue and the next one will be dated 8 January 2011.

The beautiful cover illustration and poem are by John Pickering, a member of the Kendal congregation. It is available as a Christmas card, along with others designed by John and his wife Katie. For more information contact them at creative@arten.plus.com

Correction

An article in the 27 November issue on the bicentenary celebrations held at Glasgow was wrongly attributed. It was written by Janet Briggs.



At the Turning of the Year

Heavy clouds shone darkly above the hillside,
as I stood disappointed beside an empty manger.
No great star hung motionless and brilliant in the sullen sky,
no angels sang, no wise men rode through the night, nothing stirred
but the wind that blew dust into my eyes.

A stream nearby chivvying the lazy reeds
murmured "Look within yourself and your heart's eye
will find the shepherds and the angels,
the Magi and Mary's baby in his star-lit cradle."
"Go" whispered the breeze lingering in the icy grass,
"follow the unchanging way which leads every weary soul to that light."

Suddenly, in the cold still night on that empty hillside silent
beneath its leaden canopy, there were shepherds
fallen to their knees beside their midnight fire.
The dazzled sky was full of angels, whose mighty Hallelujahs
shook the branches of the olive tree
and warmed the night with the radiance of their song.

A train of grunting camels swayed over the rim of the world,
carrying tall men from the East in robes of scarlet and purple and gold,
dignified silhouettes against the coming of a new golden dawn.
Out of the shadows, from over the hills, across the rivers, down the valleys,
surged a thousand generations of pilgrims
come to honour the child, eternal paradigm of faith and hope and love.

A wide-eyed shepherd boy, his young lamb held close, walked beside me
along that crowded joyful road to Bethlehem, to witness
and to celebrate the old year's dying, the new year's resurrection
and the promise made before the world began.
Which is now again to be fulfilled.

– Naomi Linnell

Photo by Yury Khristich

The time of the Angels – holy and rebel

Frank Walker knows thousands of angels are soon to be created.

The time of the angels is at hand. Hundreds, thousands of new angels have been, or are about to be created. Do I have access to secret information? No. It's common knowledge. It's a yearly ritual that has more to do with the local education authority than with God.

Teachers have been choosing their angels for the end of term nativity play. There's Sandra and Kathleen and Diana and Susan – no, they wouldn't quite do for Mary, but they would look very sweet as angels in the back row. Girls can stand still longer than boys, and behave themselves, so they keep on getting the part of the angels. That's why we have come to associate angels with long white nighties, golden tresses, ringlets and girlish faces.

Contrary to many people's notions, angels are not feminine. They are not meant to be sexual beings, though the names given to them in the Bible are all masculine: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel. We may rightly sense here some limitation in the ancient Hebrew imagination. The only compensation is that all the fallen angels also have masculine names, so feminists may find some comfort: darkly and obscurely the Biblical writers may have felt that women were too good to go to hell.

From the time of the Jews' exile in Babylon more and more fantasies about angels were developed until in medieval times Christian theologians could debate how many angels can stand on the point of a needle. Angels were in danger of becoming absurd. In his celebrated television series *The Sea of Faith*, Don Cupitt said that one Christmas he was singing 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear' (written by an American Unitarian minister) with its reference to angels. It was the year of Sputnik, the Russians' first satellite in space. To sing of angels now, thought Mr Cupitt, seemed nonsensical, so he stopped singing. (Actually that hymn is as much about peace as about angels, so he needn't have stopped so soon.)

As far as angels at Christmas are concerned, I don't have any difficulty. I don't understand them literally, but I take them as symbols representing other possible modes of existence in this mysterious universe. There may be intelligent and spiritual beings other than humans; let the Christmas angels stand for them, so that the circle of joy and praise is truly universal.

Talk of angels is poetic talk that doesn't have to be taken literally. The basic meaning of the Hebrew *malachim* and the Greek *angeloi* is 'messengers'. The holy angels are messengers of peace, messengers of supreme goodness. That's all they are. You don't have to think of haloes and wings and nighties.

They are messengers, the messengers you encounter in your life who come as a God-send. They help you to cross frontiers, to face something new and strange and frightening, to see the world afresh.

Rabbi Lionel Blue grew up in poverty and danger in the old East End. His grandparents had all been massacred in Eastern Europe, and there was good reason to fear persecution even in London in the 1930s. But there was a horse, Bessie, taught Yiddish by her cheerful cockney owner who liked Jews and showed it. So whenever Jewish children heard Bessie clip-clopping along, they felt safe, and were given a little extra courage to venture out from their ghetto. Bessie was a reassuring messenger of supreme goodness – an angel. Yes, according to Rabbi Blue, even an old horse in the East End can be an angel.

Jews tell an ancient story about the rebel angels who told some secrets of heaven to King Solomon. God (so the story goes) threw them out. But they didn't mope and sulk. They gave humankind another push up the ladder by teaching them languages, and healing, laws and hygiene. They wouldn't let God be dog-in-the-manger about keeping wisdom and knowledge for himself.

It's a marvellous story, similar to that of Prometheus. Don't misunderstand me: I believe there are real limits in human life. To transgress them – to practise torture, murder, cruelty – is to create terrible evil. But we often manufacture false limitations of our own that we need to break through, and the rebel angels help us. The good angels help us not to transgress the real limits.

Angels are messengers reminding us of the life of eternity in which our lives are set. As the Jewish prayer puts it:

"Come in peace, you messengers of peace, messengers from on high, from the King above the King of Kings, the Holy One – blessed be He."

*The Rev Frank Walker
is minister emeritus at
Cambridge.*



These stained-glass angels in a church in Lincolnshire are clearly male, yet the popular perception persists that angels are feminine. Photo by Roma Flowers

Solstice: believing light will come

Winter Solstice Meditation

We join our hearts and minds together in a time of meditation or prayer; spoken, silent, sung, and shared. It is a precious time, and all precious times want preparation, so I invite you to settle yourself in a straight posture, both feet grounded on the floor, to take a deep breath, hold it until you notice your need to breathe out, and relax. I invite you to close your eyes, for vision is the single most energy intensive activity of our brains.

These next few days are the days of the Winter Solstice, a time when those who are very attentive to the skies note that the sun, which has relentlessly moved southward on the horizon since last June, seems to pause on its journey before beginning to climb northwards to centre again. Solstice is a time of pause. So ... pause. Breathe. Relax. Rest. Be at peace.

Spirit of winter rest, help us to enjoy your peace in this quiet place. Remind us to pause during this season.

Grant us awareness, keep our gratitude fresh each day.

May the songs in our heart be blessings and insights to us and to others and may compassion always shine forth from the depths of our hearts.

— Christine C Robinson

Come we now

Come we now out of the darkness of our unknowing
and the dusk of our dreaming;
Come we now from far places.
Come we now into the twilight of our awakening
and the reflection of our gathering.
Come we now all together.

We bring, unilluminated, our dark caves of doubting;
We seek, unbedazzled, the clear light of understanding.
May the sparks of our joining kindle our resolve,
brighten our spirits, reflect our love,
and unshadow our days.
Come we now; enter the dawning.

— Annie Foerster

Litany

The response to each line is 'The light is reborn'.

In the greatest darkness
Out of winter's cold
From our deepest fears
When we most despair
When all seems lost
When the earth lies waste
When animals hide
When the leaves are gone
When the river is frozen
When the ground is hard
Shadows are fleeing
Light is returning
Warmth will come again
Summer will be here once more
Plants will grow again
Animals will be seen once more
Green will come again
Life will continue

— Liz Benjamin



Is Christmas a Christian holiday?

By Cliff Reed

There is little doubt that Christmas is the biggest and most popular festival in the year – but why? An apparently obvious answer is that it celebrates the birth of Christ, but that isn't quite as obvious as it seems. The most important festival in the Christian year is not Christmas but Easter – Christ's Resurrection outranking his birth.

Whereas all four canonical gospels have the Easter story as their climax, only two gospels include the Christmas story at all. And those two versions (in Matthew and Luke) differ on so many points as to be contradictory.

Mark's gospel (the earliest of the four) begins with the baptism, not the birth, of Jesus and his anointing by the Spirit. Prior to this he was simply Jesus son of Joseph, only afterwards was he Jesus the Anointed One – the Christ. For Mark, this was when the story really started and he wasn't much interested in anything that happened earlier.

The author of John's gospel actually takes a similar line to Mark, but his prologue gives the coming of Christ a spiritual, mystical and theological interpretation. He too wasn't interested in the actual circumstances of Jesus' birth, if, indeed, he knew what they were. For Mark and John, it was the direct action of God in making the man Jesus into the Christ that mattered.

Matthew and Luke, though, felt the need to establish the Messianic credentials of Jesus from ancient prophecies and direct descent from King David. As part of this both include genealogies, but these contradict each other and also sit very uneasily (to say the least) with the concept of the Virgin Birth. There are other Nativity accounts in the early Christian literature, from which a number of colourful additions to the 'Christmas story' derive, but none were regarded as worthy of inclusion in the New Testament canon.

In the early Church, Christmas wasn't really celebrated at all, until, that is, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and it was deemed politic to convert the old pagan festivals into Christian ones. And so the immensely popular mid-winter festival (under its various names across Europe) became Christmas – and still is. And there is abso-

lutely nothing wrong with having a festival of warmth and light at the darkest time of the year.

But is it Christian? Our Puritan forbears certainly didn't think so. They abolished Christmas when they got the chance under Cromwell, and still declined to celebrate it for a long time after that. As there was no date given in the gospel accounts there was no reason to celebrate Christ's birth on 25 December – and certainly no reason to do so with pagan excess! And the Rational Dissenters who succeeded the Puritans – and soon became the Unitarians – discounted the historical authenticity of the Nativity accounts anyway. For them, they were simply mythology.

But some Unitarians came to wonder why this should stop them enjoying Christmas and from taking its message of peace and goodwill as perfectly valid, regardless of its trappings. An early Unitarian rebel against the Puritan view was that remarkable and delightful writer and educationalist, Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Raised in the Dissenting Academies where her father taught, she had suffered many a doleful non-Christmas.

In her satirical piece, 'The Groans of a Tankard', the eponymous Tankard laments, "...the hour which doom'd me to a Presbyterian's power;

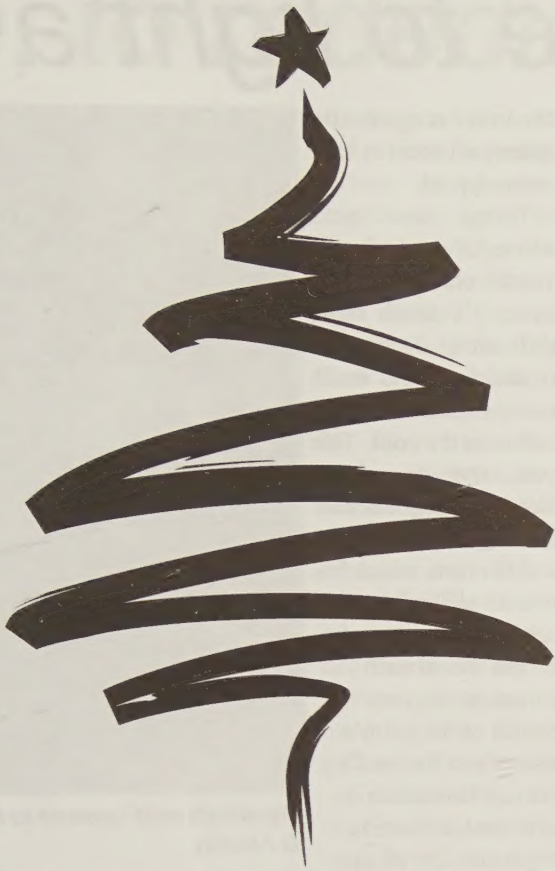
/ Fated to serve the Puritanick race, / whose slender meal is shorter than their grace...No Carnival is even Christmas here, / And one long Lent involves the meagre year."

Still, not until well into the 19th century did Unitarians begin to embrace the festival – much encouraged by one of our most illustrious converts, Charles Dickens. Dickens didn't take the gospel Nativity accounts literally, but neither did he see why Christmas shouldn't be embraced spiritually and practically. It didn't matter that 25 December probably wasn't when Jesus was born, what mattered was that he had been born and had grown up to teach us to be generous, kind and loving to each other. And if those wonderful Bible stories help us to remember that – in the brightest of festivals, in the darkness of the year – then so much the better.

The Rev Cliff Reed is minister at Ipswich.



'Mr Fezziwig's Ball', an etching by John Leech from 'A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens. Dickens encouraged Unitarians to celebrate Christmas.



CHRISTMAS LIGHT

behind man's light polluting veil

*not with certainty
not with clarity
not with continuity*

*with searching
with reason
with patience
with determination
with caring
with love*

we can yet glimpse the twinkling Christmas star
— Richard Merritt

Advent Opening Words

The travellers had come a long way, and had a long way yet to go.

Unable to come off the donkey without her husband's assistance, and with the grace of a large stone, still she came down, one hand to her back, feeling the ache throughout her body. The child in her belly kicked, and made her draw a quick breath.

Leaning heavily on Joseph's arm, Mary picked her way along the path.

Others on the road had told them that here they might find a spring, with water so cold it would hurt their teeth. Here, they might find a place of shelter and calm where they could bed down for the night.

Here we come, too, to find a moment of refreshment and rest from our journeys.

No matter where you are going on your journey,

No matter if it is your choice to go,
or if you left by far away edict,

No matter if you carry a burden or the deepest of joys,

No matter how weary and thirsty you may be,
Pause here.

Take a quiet breath.

Rest in peacefulness.

Be renewed and restored

For in a short while, the journey will continue with its worries and troubles and joys and promise.

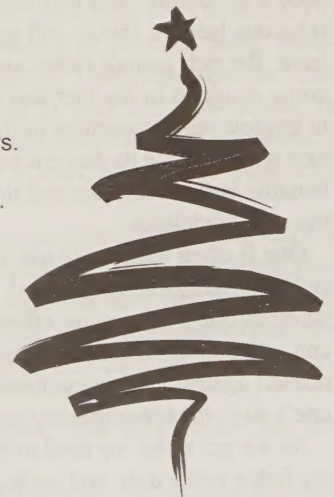
Until then,
let us join together,
minds and hearts,
and worship.

— Linda Hart
Tree illustration by 'magiecarie'

At Christmas

Bethlehem is wherever a baby is born and wonder-filled parents enjoy the moment.
Bethlehem is wherever new lives are birthed and nurtured towards independent being.
Bethlehem is wherever renewed spirit and fresh perspective emerge from out the human shadows.
Bethlehem is wherever human imagination unfolds into stories and sculptures and symphonies.
Bethlehem is wherever seeds of peace and renewal are scattered across fields of waste and war.
Bethlehem is wherever new life sprouts in contexts of death and decay.
Bethlehem is wherever a generation of old life overlaps with a generation of new.
Bethlehem is wherever gifts offered with good faith are accepted with thanks and grace.
Bethlehem is wherever the starry sun rises and 'rests' above our homes.
Bethlehem is wherever caring innkeepers find room for the needy of refuge and asylum.
Bethlehem is wherever caring innkeepers find room for the needy of refuge and asylum.
Bethlehem is wherever choirs sing 'Gloria' and bands make joyful noises to the Lord.
Bethlehem is wherever some new saviour or some new redeemer quietly slips into the world.
Bethlehem is wherever hope pushing gently comes through smothering blankets of despair.
Bethlehem is wherever and whenever . . .
It was there and then and it is here and now.
Bethlehem is . . .

— Andrew M Hill



Now is the time to light a candle

By Bill Darlison

My dad was considered to be something of a sceptic, a cynic even. A man of few words himself, he was always suspicious of anyone – particularly politicians – whose verbal skills seemed able to justify even the most disreputable of actions. ‘Whatever they say, they are just out to make money,’ was one of his recurring sentiments, and he even saw fiddling and chicanery in what seemed to us the most unlikely places. For example, he thought that cricket matches were ‘fixed’. Now, one can easily imagine a boxing match being fixed, or a formula one car race, but cricket? How on earth could they do it? Why on earth *would* they do it? My dad’s answer was simple. Cricket test matches are scheduled to last for five days, but they can be over earlier if each side has had its allotted two innings. So, to gain maximum revenue from spectators, steps are taken to ensure that the game lasts as long as possible.

We used to laugh at this particular opinion, but 20 years after his death a number of scandals broke which vindicated him. The South African cricket captain Hanse Kronje was convicted of match fraud, and other top-class cricketers were implicated. They were betting that their own side would lose and taking steps to facilitate that outcome. Players for Pakistan have also been accused. Later, footballers, particularly goalkeepers, were accused of similar fraudulent activity.

My dad’s pessimistic approach to life can be explained, in part at least, by his life-experiences. He was born in 1907 and began to work down the mines at just 13. He lived through the First World War, the General Strike of 1926, the great economic slump of the thirties, and the Second World War. It would have been hard for a working class man to find too much in these experiences to give him confidence in the political or economic systems which seemed always to benefit the rich and to keep people like him in their place.

For all that my dad was a powerful presence within the family, I never followed his example. I was more influenced by my mother who, despite living through substantially the same experiences as my dad, always seemed more optimistic. She was conventionally religious, and she would generally give people the benefit of the doubt, rarely imputing mercenary motives to people in the way that my dad customarily would.

I inherited my mother’s religious outlook and her general optimism, but as the years have gone on I have at times found myself drifting more and more in the direction of my father. Getting older is certainly the main reason for this. You realise that you have seen it all before, and that despite the rhetoric of politicians and religious leaders, things will go along pretty much as they always have, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. You become resigned to the fact that commercial interests will continue to exploit our insecurities in the name of profit; that popular culture will continue its descent into previously unimagined depths of banality and tawdriness; and that religions will continue to squabble over trivialities.

One is often tempted to ask whether it is all worthwhile, whether liberal religion, and liberal values in general have any merit, whether one’s own puny efforts are not impotent and irrelevant, and whether it wouldn’t be better to forget about it all, protect oneself against the encroachments of a corrupt society and live out one’s days in curmudgeonly isolation.

As we get older we tend to become more right wing (although my father never did), and we begin to suspect that the old solutions – more discipline in schools, more punishment of criminals, and

the iron fist against the enemy all seem to have more appeal.

Things are made worse, of course, by the winter cold and darkness; it’s much more difficult to be hopeful in the dark, and much more difficult to be sociable in the cold. This year, too, the gloom has increased because of the general economic downturn, which has left us all feeling vulnerable and exposed.

And it is at such a time, in the very depths of the earth’s winter and the soul’s dismay Hanukkah is a moveable feast. It begins on 25th of the Jewish month Kislev, and is usually in December, but it can occur in November. This year it began on 1 December and ended on Thursday. We Christians tend to ignore it, even if we are aware of it, or to see it as just an attempt on the part of the Jews to share in the Christmas spirit. But I think it has something very important to teach us.

Hanukkah means ‘dedication’. The festival celebrates the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple in 164 BCE, after it had been desecrated by the soldiers of the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus had invaded Palestine and had attempted a wholesale Hellenisation of Jewish culture. Circumcision was outlawed, a huge statue of the pagan god Zeus was erected in the Jerusalem Temple, and pigs were slaughtered on the Temple altar. Judas Maccabeus organised a revolt and eventually the invaders were expelled.

Judah ordered the Temple to be cleansed, a new altar to be built in place of the polluted one and new holy vessels to be made. According to the Talmud, olive oil was needed for the menorah in the Temple, which was required to burn throughout the night every night. But there was only enough oil to burn for one day, yet miraculously, it burned for eight days, the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of oil for the menorah. An eight-day festival was declared by the Jewish sages to commemorate this miracle. (Wikipedia entry ‘Hanukkah’)

What could possibly be the relevance of this rather fanciful story to people like us? Rabbi Arthur Waskow, an American Jew who works closely with liberals in all the religious traditions, including Unitarians, tells us: we may not have a temple of stone to dedicate, *but we can and must rededicate ourselves*. Now is the time of maximum darkness, to light, or relight our own candle and recommit ourselves to those very values which our age and circumstance seem to be eroding.

There are a number of ways of doing this. We can do it privately, and maybe it would be no bad idea to develop a ritual



Hanukkah calls upon us to keep alive the light of the Jewish people.
B Alevsky

le, to rededicate ourselves



our own optimism. Photo by Chayim

rededication which we can perform annually, perhaps on Membership Sunday or at the Anniversary Service. Perhaps we could perform it each year at Hanukkah time, and show our solidarity with Jewish people at the same time. But, since, as yet, we have no recognised public ritual, we need to do it on our own. This is what I do. Each morning, before I get out of bed, I recommit myself to those principles that have held my life together for five decades:

A reaffirmation of my belief that my life is a gift not a burden;

recommitment to the principle of human brotherhood and solidarity;

determination not to take more than my fair share of the world's goods and resources;

resolution not to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the task of determining to bear in mind these words of the American

Miller Williams: *Have compassion for everyone you meet, if they don't want it. What appears bad manners, an ill temper or cynicism is always a sign of things no ears have heard, no*

have seen. You do not know what wars are going on down where the spirit meets the bone.

You no doubt have your own list of principles that it would do for you to reconsider and then silently renew. The morning

is the best time for this. Before you fall asleep at night you should renew your day; the night is best for contemplation. But the morning

is best for commitment. Catholics are taught to say a 'morning offering' first thing, a dedication of everything they do that day

to the higher purposes of God. Our 'morning rededication' has a similar purpose and should be done with as much fervour and

clarity as we can muster. In this way we can help fight against the dreadful encroachments of world weariness and resignation.

We need to renew our dedication to the community which gives us strength and support in our efforts. Maybe it's our Unitarian community, maybe it's some other one.

Whatever it is, we must constantly tell ourselves that on our own we are weak, but together we are strong. On each day of the festival, the Jewish people will light one more candle on their Hanukkah menorah. It's a good image of the power of community:

As the flame spreads, the light increases. This excerpt of a poem 'The Low Road' by Marge Piercy, which is a good one for Membership Sunday, reminds us of the importance of solidarity:

*Alone, you can fight,
You can refuse, you can
Take what revenge you can
But they roll over you.*

*But two people fighting
Back to back can cut through
A mob, a snake-dancing file
Can break a cordon, an army
Can meet an army.*

*Two people can keep each other
Sane, can give support, conviction,
Love massage, hope, sex.*

*Three people are a delegation,
A committee, a wedge. With four
You can play bridge and start
An organisation. With six
You can rent a whole house,
Eat pie for dinner with no
Seconds, and hold a fund-raising party.*

Together we have power. Judas Maccabeus and small band of committed fighters overcame the might of an empire. 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has,' said Margaret Mead.

But the Hanukkah story has another lesson to teach us. It tells us that when we rededicate ourselves miracles occur. Although there was only enough oil for one day, it held out for the duration of the festival. But, says Arthur Waskow, this was not the real miracle of Hanukkah. The real miracle was that although they only had enough oil to last for one day, they lit the menorah anyway. They could have given up. They could have followed the advice of the pessimists who were no doubt telling them that it was pointless. Just as Homer Simpson said to Bart, 'If at first you don't succeed, give up.' But they didn't. They went ahead, in spite of the odds that were stacked against them.

These are the lessons of Hanukkah: recommitment; rededication; solidarity; determination to act even though there seems little chance of any success. Its message is that we should light candles of hope, rather than curse the darkness in despair. These are the best antidotes we possess to that creeping cynicism which constantly tempts us to relax our efforts and even to abandon them. We must not give in to hopelessness.

My dad indeed tended towards pessimism, but he never surrendered to it completely, because he saw real positive and beneficial changes in his lifetime. In his view, the National Health Service in Britain was a colossal step forward, which was made because the people willed it and enlightened politicians engineered it. On a more personal level, the introduction of pit-head baths transformed his life and the life of his family. I can remember the miners coming home from work caked in coal dust and bathing in tin baths in front of the fire. But collective effort brought about a change which enabled the miners to walk home from work with some dignity.

Pessimism is easy, because pessimists are usually right. But not always. Remember, David slew Goliath; Jack killed the giant. Pessimists are usually right, but only optimists have ever changed the world. Hanukkah calls upon us to keep alight the flame of our own optimism, inspired by Jesus' promise that faith can move mountains.

For Marge Piercy's complete poem, 'The Low Road' see her website at <http://bit.ly/18xNlk>

The Rev Bill Darlison is a retired Unitarian minister.

True story of a little Christmas 'alien'

By Colin Morgan

During the 1960's I worked in Poland, and my late wife and I always returned to spend Christmas at home with our families.

We travelled with British European Airways and we found that most Polish people on these flights were either very young or very old. Polish travellers had great difficulty obtaining permission to travel to Western Europe. It was the time of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall kept Eastern Europeans in their own countries. But if you were very young or very old, your chances of obtaining a passport were slightly enhanced. The British flights to London hardly ever had a Polish translator, and my wife and I were often asked to assist Polish travellers.

One winter, we witnessed a sad scene at Warsaw Airport. It was snowing heavily and a large family was saying farewell to a young girl, just 6 years old. Her parents and her many brothers and sisters were wishing her a good journey to London, and her father kept reminding her she had no reason to worry, as her Aunt Zosia would be waiting for her at Heathrow.

Despite the snow and freezing cold, the scene was punctuated by laughter, tears and warm-hearted family banter.

When we boarded our aircraft, a stewardess approached and asked if a young Polish girl could join us, as there was no one who could translate for her. We agreed. We soon learnt her name was Wanda, and that she was going to London to be adopted by her Aunt Zosia. She had four sisters and three brothers, who all thought that she was lucky because they all loved Aunt Zosia. She attributed her good fortune to being the youngest.

About a half hour into the flight, a voice announced: 'We regret to inform passengers that due to bad weather conditions your flight is being diverted to Copenhagen. Passengers will shortly be issued with hotel vouchers. Thank You.'

I reminded the stewardess of Wanda's Aunt waiting for her in London. The Captain had already arranged for a message to be sent to Wanda's Aunt. For our stop in Copenhagen, the stewardess explained that Wanda would have her own hotel room, but she might prefer to share ours. By this time little Wanda was looking tired, and very concerned. So she asked if she could share our room. When we agreed she became pensive, stopped talking, and would only answer our questions with a 'yes' or a 'no'.

After a light meal, which she did not want to share, we retired for the evening.

The hotel staff had prepared a small bed for Wanda in our room where she was the first to undress and in seconds she was adorned like an angel in one of my wife's nightdresses.

Kneeling beside her bed, Wanda said a prayer, not for herself, despite being somewhat frightened by the events of the day, but a prayer for the health and well being of her parents, brothers and sisters and her school friends whom she had left

in Poland.

It was an unselfish act of devotion and a salutary lesson for my wife and I which I still cherish.

We left early the following morning on a flight to London, the weather was cold and it was snowing heavily again.

The flight left on time. But after an hour there was an announcement on the tannoy: 'We regret to inform passengers that due to bad weather conditions over London, the flight is being diverted to Manchester.'

We consulted our stewardess who advised that Wanda would be looked after by BEA staff at Manchester Airport, but she would have to be accompanied through customs, and would we be prepared to do this to allay Wanda's fears? We agreed.

At all International Airports there are two entry points to the Customs checkout, one is marked for 'UK Citizens ONLY' and the other for 'ALIENS'. Despite my pleas to the airport staff, Wanda was not allowed to join us through the UK Citizens' door, she had to enter the Aliens' door and climb a long stairway to the customs department.

She was not permitted to be accompanied, and I had great difficulty in explaining this to Wanda – who by this time was doing her best to repress her tears.

She kept asking, 'What is an alien?'

'Was Jesus an Alien?' she asked.

'Well, yes, sort of,' I replied.

'So am I a Christian Alien like Jesus?' she said.

'Yes,' I said. 'I think you are.'

'Oh no, I'm not. I am much luckier than Jesus because nobody wanted his family when he was born. In fact, they were refused lodgings at an inn. But I have my brothers and sisters and my Mam and my Dad – they all love me and Auntie Zosia loves me too. She is going to look after me.'

'So who am I? Please tell me. Who am I? Am I an alien?'

I was having some difficulty with Wanda's questioning so I took a deep breath and said

'You are a very brave Polish girl who is about to show everybody here how really courageous you are, and how stupid men can be with their silly rules. Now please hold your head high and go up those stairs where my wife Jean will be waiting for you.'

So Wanda, a child of 6, went up the stairs, clutching her food bag as if her very life depended on it, with a tear on her cheek but with head held high, and greeted my wife with a little smile,

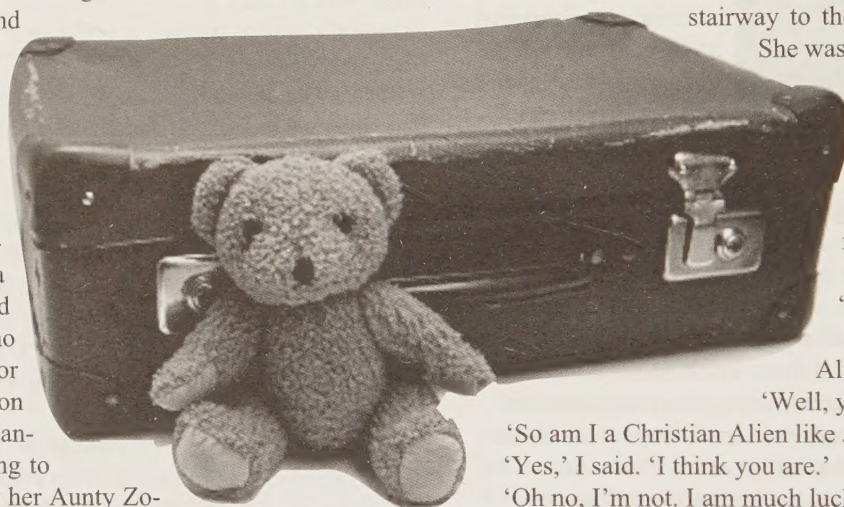
During our journey I had noted that Wanda was carrying a food bag which she had placed outside our bedroom window at our hotel. This was quite common – all Poles did this, as it was a cheap and simple way of freezing food.

The first question the Customs Officer asked was

'What has she in her Food Bag?' I relayed the question to Wanda who replied in Polish, saying, 'Two wood pigeons, a small goose, and kielbasa Sausages.'

I was not prepared for such an answer and was completely

(Continued on next page)



Pigeon and kielbasa on the menu

(Continued from page 11)

dumbstruck – aware of the strict regulations concerning the importation of meat and poultry.

I said, 'What!' Wanda again spoke with the innocence of a young child and declared, 'You have forgotten it is Christmas. I have two wood pigeons one goose and lots of lovely kielbasa Sausages – they are all presents for my Aunt Zosia who loves me. Don't you remember, it's Christmas?' she said.

The Customs Officer noted my embarrassment and said with a twinkle in his eye, 'I suppose like most Poles she has some kielbasa Sausages.' I nodded my head and said 'Yes'. 'OK,' he replied, 'off you go!' And we were happy to leave.

As we approached the exit door, he called us back and said, 'Enjoy your wood pigeons, enjoy your goose and enjoy those lovely kielbasa sausages! Have a Merry Christmas.'

I later learnt that the Custom Officer had been born in the UK to Polish Parents and evidently he too understood Polish!

We were soon ushered into the BEA office, given comfortable chairs and some hot tea. They had obviously been briefed about Wanda and requested that I ask Wanda for her Aunt's UK address. Wanda removed a bag from her neck which contained her passport, air tickets, lots of school and family photographs and her Aunt's address which had been written on a large piece of cardboard.

'Well that is splendid,' said the BEA official, it confirms all the information which your Aunt had passed on by telephone.

'And now I have very good news for you all. Aunt Zosia only lives three miles away from this airport. Her husband, your uncle Taduesh, is waiting for you and before the end of the day your Aunt will be home from London. So without any further delay, I am going to take you, Wanda, to your new home. Merry Xmas everyone and I'm certain it will be a very happy one indeed for Wanda and her new family!

People on hearing this story, ask have I kept in touch with Wanda? No, regrettably I have not, because unfortunately I did not take note of Aunt Zosia's address.

But since working in Poland, I too have acquired a taste for wood pigeons, geese and lovely kielbasa sausages and sometimes, as a rare treat, I have them for Xmas, and when I do, I invariably fall asleep after dinner and dream dreams.

I see Wanda in my dreams. She is now a mature grandmother, not an unwanted alien but a decent UK citizen having a granddaughter of her own called Wanda, and I am still haunted by her telling and re-telling her story of her journey from Poland to be adopted by her Aunt Zosia, so I will finish my story as Wanda concluded hers in my dream. 'Thank God', she said, 'I was befriended by a tall man and his wife. He spoke Polish with a strange Welsh accent, but he respected me and gave me courage to complete my journey, not as an alien, but as an ordinary young girl who was happily looking forward to Christmas and a new life in the UK.'

Colin Morgan attends Gellionnen and Graig chapels.

The Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow Fund

There were eleven holidays in 2010. The children's descriptions of what the holidays meant to them are deeply moving.

Thank you for helping to make these holiday possible.

Please help us

to continue giving needy children a country holiday.

Your gifts in 2009/2010 amounted to the excellent sum of £25,851 **Very, very many thanks.**

Your gifts for the 2011 holidays will be as deeply appreciated as ever. **Our target is £30,000 for direct donations. It costs approximately £250 per child and we hope to send two hundred children in 2011.**

Gifts will be gratefully received by the Hon. Assistant Treasurer, Rev. Chris Goacher, 19 De Montfort Road, Hinckley, Leics., LE10 1LQ. Please note that the Fund can reclaim income tax paid by any individual (as long as s/he has paid income tax) if a Gift Aid Donation form has been signed. This is now a vital part of the fund's income. Please help in this way if you can. A copy of this form will be inserted in a December issue of *The Inquirer*, or may be obtained from Mr. Goacher. Giving with a Gift Aid Donation form makes a gift of £20 worth £25.65 to the Fund. Gifts may now be made very easily on line by going to our website: **www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk**

The Fund is a registered charity number 271585. All gifts are used for the holidays except for gifts in memory of someone that are put into a Capital Account and the interest is used for holidays. Please remember the Fund in your will. Legacies are a much appreciated and valuable income.

Copies of the report and appeal may be obtained from the Hon. Secretary Rev Ernest Baker, 145 Tullibardine Road, Sheffield, South Yorks., S11 7GN, telephone 0114 266 1070.

UEW 2010 was a marvellous time

By Stephen Gutteridge

On 25 August, those involved in Unitarian Experience Week 2010, joined the congregation in the lovely Hope Valley chapel of Great Hucklow for morning service. As always on these occasions the visitors were given a warm and friendly welcome by the host congregation. Having travelled to the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow the previous day; to some this marked the real beginning of Unitarian Experience Week.

The theme for the week was 'Reaching for the High Notes – to strive, to seek, to find, the positives in life. How do we *strive* against the siren voices of our own self doubt and despair? Do Unitarians individually and collectively still have the desire and hunger to seek the *positives* in life?'

The Rev Geoffrey Usher's address gave us a very humorous guide on how we often make each day a truly "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day". Ways of doing this include always comparing ourselves to others, generalising, viewing life as fate etc. In contrast, he then gave us some advice on how to strive against the idea of each day being; a truly "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day".

Over the next week we explored, like travellers on a journey, seeking the positives in life. This journey was sometimes in the company and fellowship of others, sometimes in the quietness and solitude of private meditation and prayer. Themed talks were given by Richard Merritt on the 'History of Music', and 'Universalism' co-hosted by the Revs Michael Dadson and Phil Silk, an American Unitarian.

Phil gave a potted history of the growth of Universalism in the American Unitarian movement. Michael then asked us to put some Unitarian hymns into three categories, reflecting whether Unitarianism is a complementary faith, a stand-alone faith and or carrying a simpler message than other non-Unitarian faiths. The third theme was covered by Vic Mason, who gave a personal view of the current debate about climate change, under the title of 'Climate Change: when science and politics meet'.

In the afternoon various activities and work shops were

organised and run. To those who have not partaken of a UEW, a reminder that taking part in any of the week's activities is not compulsory. Individuals can partake as little or as much as they wish, bearing in mind the more you put in; the more you get out. The activities included 'Finding God in a Modern World' led by Tony McNeile and a play reading "The Orchestra" by Jean Anouilh ably conducted by Margaret Murray. Lesley Harris led the workshops on 'Carrying on after you have blown it' and 'Poetry and prose' and the final early morning service of the week. My own contribution to UEW was an evening epilogue on the John Lennon song 'Imagine' and a workshop on the book 'The Man They Called The Christ' by David C. Doel (Book available on lulu at <http://bit.ly/fV37Av>).

Other workshops, meditations and formal acts of worship were led or facilitated by Camilla Williams, David Copley, Karen Hanley, Sue Woolley, Lyanne Mitchell, Kathy Becket and Helen Copley. I would like to pay tribute to all the work put in by all the theme and workshop leaders.

As well as workshops we also had a folk evening and a social evening, both of which were very successful. I would like to thank all the leaders and performers in the band, choir and individual party pieces.

One of the great strengths of Great Hucklow as a venue is the opportunity of walking in the Peak District National Park, which is on the doorstep. David Copley, as in previous years, acted as a very capable and proficient walk leader, and this year the weather was kind to the walkers!

An account of this year's UEW would not be complete with a thank you to all the hard working staff at the Nightingale Centre who did everything they could to ensure our comfort.

The week ended as it began with a communal act of worship and meditation, which rounded off the happy and enduring memories of a week of friendship, fellowship and community. A week spent striving to find the positives in life, seeking the positive in others; and finding a positive and compassionate understanding of our own strengths and weaknesses.

Stephen Gutteridge is a UEW committee member.

Interfaith Pride and acceptance in Liverpool

By Angela Howard

We, the Unitarians, were invited to take part in an Inter-faith service of reflection and celebration by, and for, the LGBT people of faith and their allies. This took place the evening before the Pride walk through Liverpool city centre in August. The Liverpool Quaker meeting House and Liverpool Spectrum of Spirituality, a new network of LGBT people of faith and the groups that support them, hosted it. The name Spectrum of Spirituality was inspired by the theme of this year's Liverpool Pride: the Rainbow Circle. The theme of the service was 'Unity in Diversity' chosen to reflect that just as white light is made up from all the colours of the rainbow, so people of diverse sexuality, gender identity, faith and culture can come together to promote equality.

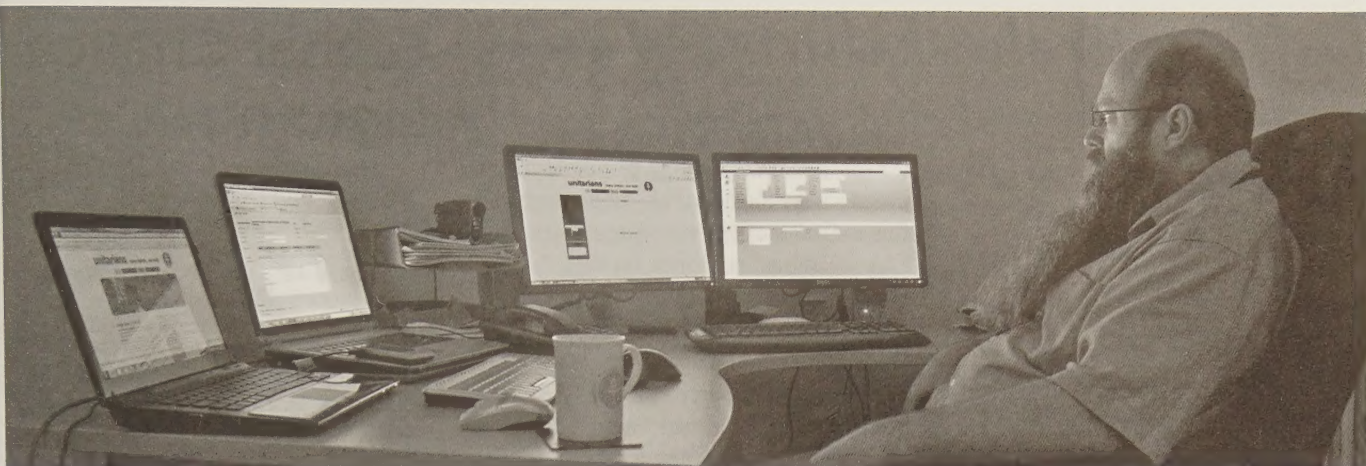
Faiths represented: Anglican, Catholic, United Reform, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Quaker, Hindu, Pagan and

Unitarian. I read a poem attributed to the Hopi Elders, a Native American people who strive towards a concept, which involves a state of reverence and respect for all things, to be at peace with these things, and to live according to their Creator or Caretaker of earth. This was at the end of the service, bringing the spectrum together. A very moving experience, especially hearing a poem read by a young Muslim man.

It was the first service of its kind in Great Britain. The feedback was very encouraging, so much so that more services or events are being planned. I felt very honoured to be our representative: acceptance, tolerance and the search for truth.

Maybe that should read 'the search for being oneself and being accepted for it!'

– Angela Howard is a lay minister at Ullet Road Church, Liverpool.



DUWIT team hits their targets

By James Barry

At last 'UkUnitarians' has hit our first target. The 50th site was launched on www.ukunitarians.org.uk – a facility that allows congregations, districts and Unitarian societies to maintain their own websites. Created two years ago, it has helped to improve the internet presence of Unitarians in the UK and has doubled the number of good congregational websites. Now about half the total UK congregations are fully 'online'. Before the existence of this 'Content Management System' (CMS) facility, congregations unable to build their own site could only use the very dated GA webpage scheme (unfortunately still used by a dozen congregations) or had to ask Chris Granger (who has now left the movement) or John Wilkinson to create and maintain a site manually. While that was useful for a few sites, they could not cope with the number of congregations needing websites. The new facility not only drastically reduces the time to create a new site, as most of the work is done automatically, but allows congregations to make text based changes themselves.

It's not a perfect system. It's a shame that only John or I can add the newsletters and images. But the number of these changes is not enough for this task to be un-manageable. More important is extending the facility with new options. For example, we have some more video clips from David Usher explaining the Unitarian view on religious fundamentalism and different rites of passage that really help explain what we stand for – the questions potential Unitarians want answered.

We want to help more congregations to start podcasting (online sermons that can be downloaded and listened to on your computer, mp3 player or iPod). So far, few congregations are doing this. If people are happy listening to our message on a bus going to work, that's what we have to give them.

Another development being planned is to link the events page on the national site into congregational websites so you can see either local or national events from individual congregations' websites. With all this information coming from a single source, it will reduce the time required to maintain it. This facility is now working on the new London and South East District site www.ldpa.org.uk.

As well as extending the current facility, we will have a massive job convincing some of the congregations to come on board. We still have a quarter of congregations without websites and another quarter with embarrassingly awful sites. These look terrible, despite the many hours of work spent by some well meaning enthusiastic individuals. These 'home-

brew' sites are just not up to the standard required today. If these people really want to do it themselves, they are much better setting up a 'blog' (online diary of thoughts and ideas) which has preset layouts.

We don't seem to be able to convince some congregations that the online world is where new members are to be found. They will be part of the internet generation and will do their homework on a place of worship before stepping through the door of any church. They want to know what we stand for and that we are not religious extremists or have some other weird philosophy. The web is now the first place where people look for the answers to their spiritual questions. This means with a poor presence, we can not be found by people who are trying to find us. We are truly a divided society – the 'online-enlightened' against the few 'computers are for younger people' brigade who because they don't enter the world of the web and have no idea of the ever increasing influence it has on every aspect of lives today. Its power and its potential for all movements, including ours, is ever increasing as this monumental shift in society, still manages to pass some of people by. These days it is not only information-gathering people do on the web, but shopping, paying bills, banking, socialising, booking car MOTs, holidays, watching television and communicating with others. People who use the web for all of these functions are suspicious of any organisation which doesn't have a good, fully online presence; presuming they are either incompetent or they have something to hide.

While in my view a good, clean interesting website is essential, I am not saying it guarantees more people in the pews. But you will not get the opportunity to impress these potential members unless you can first get them to the door of your church and a good internet presence will do that. Maintaining numbers (and possibly even growth) require a number of key things to be in place, a good website being just one – a big one, but just one.

A few years ago congregations could blame lack of support or the cost involved for reasons for not being online, but they no longer have that excuse.

For our Welsh congregations, we have now a dual language option. This was the last reason we had heard for congregations not being online, and we solved the problem.

Help is at hand and is waiting with open arms to pull congregations over this division we have in the modern world.

Photo: James Barry works at Unitarian headquarters at Essex Hall. Reach him on jbarry@unitarian.org.uk

Letters to the Editor

Value of one volunteer is recognised

For the past 20 years Unitarian Cynthia Richardson from Manchester has committed her time and effort, travelling to Romania for Woman Link. These trips were organised to provide vitally needed facilities in pre-natal and post-natal care that were lacking for women there.

She has visited hospitals in Odorheiu Secuiesc and Sighisoara to see at first hand the benefits that Unitarian monies have made to the women. This was made possible with the help of generous grants and donations both from the Women's League, the Women's Group and many individuals and congregations.

Some examples of the gynaecological advances that have been achieved are a decline in the number of abortions and the relieving of the suffering of the women patients by providing laparoscopes and foetal heart monitors. For women to take a full and proper role in society they require the health care that we take for granted in this country. Therefore to acknowledge Cynthia's admirable involvement, the Women's League and the Women's Group have combined together and sent her gift vouchers as a token of our appreciation.

Surely Cynthia is a prime example of the 2011 GA theme, 'Valuing our Volunteers'!

Sonya Richards

on behalf of the
Unitarian Women's Group

Does anyone have God's number?

To the Editor:

I believe that the Spirit of God is present in all life and is indivisible, so God's number is one, or "unity" which is the base of all counting. I can imagine the Godhead becoming manifest in any number of forms including three, but unless we include metaphors these can only belong to the finite set of different life forms, each subset having a finite number of members. Bertrand Russell remarked in this context that it sounded odd to talk of the enumerable set of all earwigs but we can. So, as a mathematician would say, there are "aleph null" living things,

equal to common or garden infinity, meaning that they can in principle be counted. As the set of all living things, this is God's other, very large, number. I have Biblical authority for this: "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." (Luke 12:6-7) Metaphors are a human linguistic creation. Creativity, empathy and poetic licence in their use provide excellent means of communicating about religion with others, but investing metaphors with a share in the Spirit and so with lives of their own is idolatrous and bewitches our minds.

Perhaps one of your correspondents will tell me what "ism" contains my rational belief on this topic, or to which "isms" I am failing to subscribe – and why it should matter.

Jim Stearn

Lincoln Unitarian Chapel

Draw circles of inclusion, not exclusion

To the Editor:

It is very sad if, as the Rev Ashley Hills says, 'Liberal Christian' draws a line that excludes religious humanists. (*Inquirer* letter, 30 October) Fortunately, this is where the name 'Unitarian' is so much better than 'Liberal Christian' or 'Free Christian'. It draws a circle that includes the religious humanist.

Peter B Godfrey

Kings Stanley
Stonehouse

Grateful for retirement gifts

To the Editor:

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Governors and Committee of Unitarian College Manchester for the very generous gifts I received at the Governors' AGM in October following my resignation from the position of Administrator at the College.

I am deeply touched not only by the generosity of the gifts, but also by the very kind and sincere words said to me at my departure. Please accept my heartfelt thanks.

Liz Shaw

Grindleford
Derbyshire

Global Chalice Lighting

The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists announces the 88th in its monthly series of global chalice lighting readings. Every month, a reading is distributed to Unitarian and Universalist congregations around the world. Each congregation is asked to use the reading for one worship service in the designated month, identifying it as the 'Global Chalice Lighting' for that month and naming the group which submitted it. It is hoped that the ICUU Global Chalice Lighting Project will enhance the worship experience in our congregations and raise awareness of the international dimensions of our religious movement.

This Global Chalice Lighting is to be used during December 2010.

This Global Chalice Lighting is submitted in by the British General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. It is to be used during December 2010.

As we light our chalice
at the ending of one year
and the beginning of another
year,
we affirm...

The radiant joy and beauty
of the world in which we live

The unity of all life and our
interdependence
with the rest of creation

Our responsibility to care for and
sustain
all forms of life on the planet for
future generations

The uniqueness and equal dignity
of every person

The power of unconditional love
to transform lives

The importance of constantly
seeking truth and wisdom

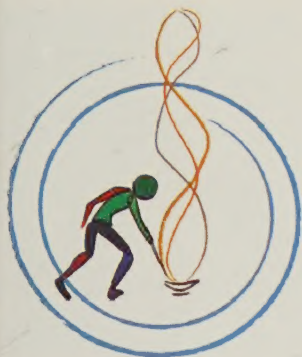
Our commitment to support each
other
in the task of building the
Kingdom of Heaven,
based on peace, justice and love

The divine ground of our being
that connects us with each other
and the infinite
and which replenishes and heals
us

**-Roger Courtney
All Souls Non-Subscribing
Presbyterian Church, Belfast,
N. Ireland**

News in brief

'Light the Flame' in January, ignite your faith and congregation



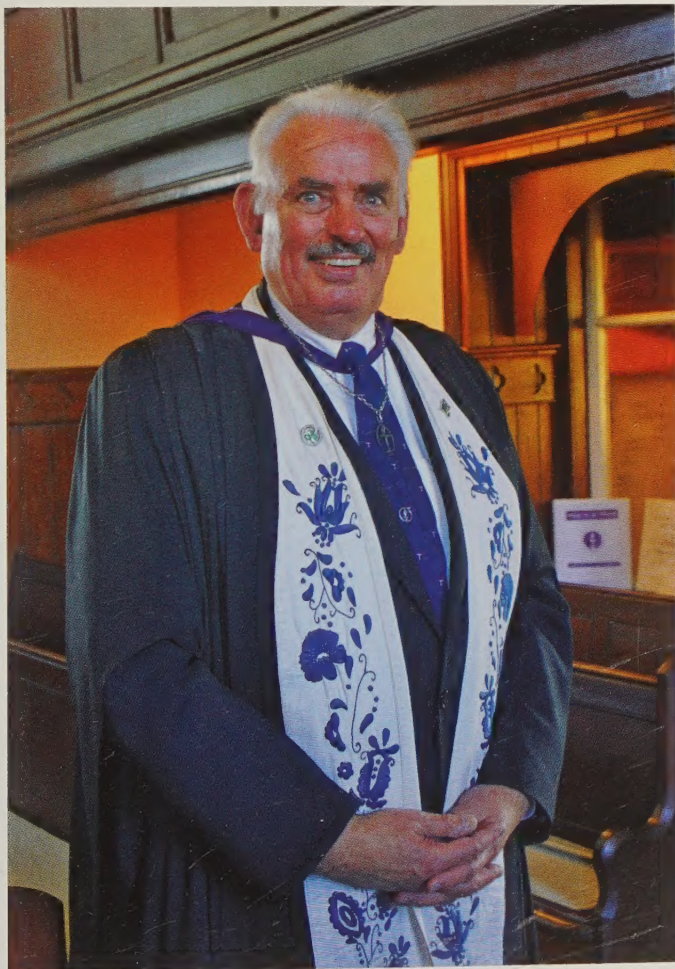
This exciting initiative will take place over the weekend of 28-30 January, 2011 at The Friars, Aylesford, near Maidstone.

If your Unitarian faith is a rich part of your life, and you would like others to be able to experience it too, then we really hope you will come to this unique District event.

It will be a weekend full of new ways of looking at our-

selves as we are now and hope to become in the future. There will be inspiring music and innovative worship. There will be times for quiet personal reflection and lively group discussions, and the sharing of fun and fellowship in a truly beautiful setting.

Together we can explore a vision of strong and vibrant congregations with inspiring worship and a social justice witness which makes a real difference in people's lives and the world. We encourage you to – make the decision now and commit a weekend of your time, a little of your resources, your passion and energy to help Unitarianism evolve.



The Rev Geoff Usher took his last service at the Old Chapel, Great Hucklow in August, after retiring from ministry at Upper Chapel, Sheffield where he was minister for 19 years. He will live now in Australia

You will leave this weekend event with tools to enliven your congregation and a renewed enthusiasm for doing so. You will have discovered others who share your excitement, and will have formed coalitions for mutual encouragement and support. Unitarian congregations can make a difference, they can grow, they can attract more people, and they can truly be transformative for how we live our lives and how we impact the world.

We are confident you will enjoy 'Light the Fire' if you come. More important, by coming you can make a real difference for yourself, for your congregation and for our shared future.

Register now by going to www.ldpa.org.uk or by contacting Louise Baumberg at louise.baumberg@googlemail.com

Cost: £160 full adult, £100 concessions for under 35s and new Unitarians (cost includes full board). £50 for children (age 3-15 years) Grants are available!



Liz Shaw (right) is congratulated on her retirement by UCM President Dawn Buckle.

Liz Shaw retires from UCM

On Wednesday 27 October, the Unitarian College Manchester held its AGM. Along with the usual proceedings, the College and Governors said a fond farewell to Liz Shaw (photo left) who retired as Administrator of the College in September, after six years of service. Liz's outstanding contribution to the work of the College was warmly and gratefully acknowledged by the President, Dawn Buckle, the current Principal, the Rev Alex Bradley and the former Principal, Rev Ann Peart. Liz was then presented with a gift, flowers and a cheque covering the many donations received to her testimonial fund.

It was also a pleasure to witness the Rev Bob Pounder receiving his college certificate, having graduated from the College in June. Sadly, the Rev Danny Crosby was unable to attend.

After the AGM and the buffet meal, the Rev Linda Phillips gave a talk on 'Directions in Ministry', in which she considered the challenges facing the ministry in the age of the internet and virtual communications.

For myself, it was a wonderful opportunity to meet many people whose names were familiar to me after a lifelong connection with Unitarians by way of my parents, the Rev David and Colleen Skelton. I would like to thank everyone for the warm welcome I have received, along with Liz for her ongoing support, as I seek to fill the gap left by her leaving.

– Rachel Skelton is an administrator at UCM

When a child is born

Every child that is born is a child of hope.
Even in the shadows of shattered dreams
Each new life offers the promise of a new
tomorrow.

Hope for ourselves, and for the world.
In each new soul our past and future are
connected

And a billion new possibilities are born.
Our children are part of us – yet more than us:
They belong to themselves.

The birth of a child is the embodiment of
wonder,

And mystery, and hope for us all.

For even a child born in obscurity
Can change the world!

– John Pickering

